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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00
NSAE-00 NSCE-00 SSO-00 USIE-00 INRE-00 PM-05 H-01
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OMB-01 TRSE-00 /089 W
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O R 251242Z MAR 78
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 2174
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USMISSION SINAI
USMISSION USUN NY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 4083

E. O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT PGOV IS
SUBJ: LIBERAL PARTY AND LABOR COMMENTS ON BEGIN-WEIZMAN
RIVALRY REMAIN CAUTIOUS

1. SUMMARY: FORMER LIBERAL MK ZALMAN ABRAMOV, WHO HAS LONG BEEN AN ADVOCATE OF A LIBERAL PARTY BREAK WITH LIKUD, AND LABOR MK MICHA HARISH EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT WEIZMAN'S CALL FOR A NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT MAY HAVE BEEN PREMATURE, AND THAT HE SHOULD HAVE WAITED FOR CLEARER SIGNS OF HOW WELL BEGIN WILL BE ABLE TO HANDLE CONFLICTS IN HIS COALITION. LABOR AND THE LIBERALS WOULD PREFER TO CHALLENGE BEGIN ON DOMESTIC RATHER THAN FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES IN ORDER NOT TO EXPOSE THEMSELVES TO CHARGES OF WEAKENING NATIONAL UNITY AT A CRITICAL MOMENT. AT THIS POINT, THERE IS NO CLEAR CONSENSUS IN THE
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LIBERAL FACTION OF THE LIKUD FOR A BREAK. THE DOMINANT MOOD IS ONE OF WAIT AND SEE. WHILE A DESIRE FOR NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS WITH THE US AND RESUMPTION OF NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT REMAINS STRONG, BOTH ARE NOT LIKELY TO BE ACHIEVED UNDER BEGIN'S CONTINUING LEADERSHIP. END SUMMARY

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2. REGARDING WEIZMAN'S CALL FOR A NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT, BOTH HARISH AND ABRAMOV FELT THAT WEIZMAN HAD REVERTED TO HIS OLD IMPETUOUS BEHAVIOR AND THAT HE HAD JUMPED THE GUN. BEGIN HAD ALREADY SLAPPED HIM DOWN WITHOUT REJECTING THE IDEA OUT OF HAND, WITH HIS STATEMENT AT THE AIRPORT YESTERDAY SAYING THAT "IF WEIZMAN WANTED A GOVERNMENT OF PEACE, THAT GOVERNMENT ALREADY EXISTS." MOREOVER, AT THIS STAGE LABOR AND THE LIKUD COULD NOT REALISTICALLY JOIN FORCES. ABRAMOV SAID THAT IN HIS OPINION WEIZMAN SHOULD HAVE WAITED TO SEE WHAT THE DMC WOULD DO. ADMITTEDLY THAT WAS STILL HIGHLY UNPREDICTABLE, BUT THE UPCOMING DEBATES ON THE PERFORMANCE OF THE GOVERNMENT WOULD HAVE GIVEN HIM A BETTER INDICATION OF BEGIN'S STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITIES.

3. ABRAMOV SPECULATED THAT WEIZMAN MAY HAVE ACTED BEFORE BEGIN'S RETURN BOTH ON THE BASIS OF HIS GROWING POPULAR SUPPORT AS REFLECTED IN RECENT PUBLIC OPINION POLLS AND OUT OF CONCERN THAT IN THE DAYS TO COME AND IN THE LIGHT OF THE GROWING STRAIN OF HIS RELATIONS WITH BEGIN INCREASING CRITICISM MAY BE DIRECTED AGAINST HIM. THAT CRITICISM IS LIKELY TO STRESS THE FAILURE TO PROTECT ISRAEL'S COAST LINE AND QUESTIONS OF OVER-KILL AND THE LACK OF POLITICAL PLANNING IN THE CONFIDENTIAL

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EXECUTION OF THE LEBANESE INVASION. THEREFORE, RATHER THAN REACT DEFENSIVELY, HE PREFERRED TO ATTACK.

4. ABRAMOV THOUGHT, HOWEVER, THAT BEGIN COULD NOT READILY AFFORD TO UNDERMINE HIS DEFENSE MINISTER SINCE HE COULD NOT DISMISS HIM NOR WOULD HE WANT HIS RELATIONS WITH WEIZMAN REDUCED TO THE STATE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN RABIN AND PERES. BOTH THE OPTIONS OF CALLING FOR NEW ELECTIONS OR OF RESIGNING WITH THE CABINET IN ORDER TO FORM A NEW MAJORITY WOULD BE RISKY FOR BEGIN IN THE PRESENT SITUATION. AT THE SAME TIME, ABRAMOV AND HARISH SHARED THE VIEW THAT WEIZMAN WOULD COME OUT SECOND BEST IF HE OPENLY CHALLENGES BEGIN.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 TEL AVIV 4083

OM THE CURRENT MOOD OF THE COUNTRY IS ONE OF DEEP ANXIETY AND UNCERTAINTY THAT A MERE CHANGE OF GUARD WOULD READILY GET THE COUNTRY OUT OF ITS PRESENT IMPASSE. THUS, DESPITE MOUNTING CONCERN AND CRITICISM OF BEGIN WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT COALITION ALL SIDES PREFER FOR THE TIME BEING TO BIDE THEIR TIME. MOREOVER, NOTWITHSTANDING THAT THE PRINCIPAL CRITICISM AGAINST BEGIN IS DIRECTED AT HIS HANDLING OF FOREIGN POLICY, THOSE SEEKING A CHANGE PREFER TO CHALLENGE HIS LEADERSHIP ON HIS PERFORMANCE ON THE DOMESTIC FRONT, ESPECIALLY IN THE LIGHT OF ANTIC-IPATED LABOR AND SOCIAL CONFLICTS DURING THE NEXT FEW MONTHS.

6. HARISH AND ABRAMOV AGREED THAT BEGIN WOULD FACE A HARD TIME IN THE COMING WEEKS AND WOULD BE CHALLENGED REGARDING HIS HANDLING OF RELATIONS WITH THE US,
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PEACE NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT, HIS SELECTION OF CHAVET AS PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE, AND HIS NEGLECT OF THE SHARPENING HERUT-LIBERAL RIFT. HOWEVER, THEY ADMITTED THAT BEGIN WAS A MASTERFUL PARLIAMENTARY TACTICIAN AND THEY SAW FOR THE TIME BEING LITTLE

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PROSPECT THAT THE LIBERALS WOULD BREAK WITH HERUT.
EHRLICH COULD BE COUNTED ON TO KEEP HIS LIBERAL
FACTION IN THE LIKUD AS LONG AS POSSIBLE.

7. HARISH SAID THAT THE LABOR PARTY WILL QUESTION
BEGIN VERY SHARPLY, BUT WILL PROBABLY REFRAIN FROM
CALLING FOR A NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION AS HAD BEEN
REPORTED SINCE SUCH A MOTION WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY
BE DEFEATED AND SERVE ONLY TO ENCOURAGE THE GOVERNMENT
COALITION TO PULL TOGETHER. AGREEING THAT
WEIZMAN'S MOVE MAY BE PREMATURE, HARISH WAS RETICENT
TO COMMENT ON ANY POSSIBILITY OF LABOR RESPONDING
TO WEIZMAN'S APPEAL. LABOR AT THIS STAGE WOULD TRY
TO EXPLOIT AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE BEGIN'S DISCOMFITURE
OVER HIS CONTROVERSY WITH THE LIBERALS REGARDING
THEIR BACKING OF RIMALT AGAINST THE PRIME MINISTER'S
CHOICE OF CHAVET.. BEGIN IS EXPECTED TO CALL FOR A TEN
DAY DELAY OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND EITHER
DELAY THE KNESSET RECESS (NOW SCHEDULED FOR APRIL 5)
OR RECALL THE KNESSET FOR A SPECIAL SESSION TO ELECT
A NEW PRESIDENT. HE WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY HAVE
TO ABANDON CHAVET'S CANDIDACY; THIS WILL LEAVE HIM
WITH CHOICE OF ACCEPTING RIMALT OR OF NOMINATING
NAVON. SHOULD NAVON ACCEPT, HE WOULD PROBABLY OBTAIN
A MAJORITY WITH THE HELP OF THE ALIGNMENT AND THUS
PARTIALLY RESTORE BEGIN'S AUTHORITY. HOWEVER, THIS
WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY ADD TO THE LIBERAL-HERUT STRAIN
AND THE DIVISIONS WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT COALITION.
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8. COMMENT: DESPITE THE GENERALLY GUARDED COMMENTS
OF BOTH ABRAMOV AND HARISH REGARDING
THE POSSIBILITY OF A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT, THE TENOR
OF THEIR CONVERSATION REFLECTED NEVERTHELESS THEIR
BELIEF THAT BEGIN'S FUTURE IS INCREASINGLY
UNCERTAIN AND THAT THERE IS A GROWING AIR
OF ANTICIPATION OF A REALIGNMENT OF POLITICAL
FORCES. VIETS

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